

## **Where's My Stuff?; Some Internet moving companies have held belongings hostage while they increased the price of delivery**

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WHERE'S MY STUFF? Announcer: And now, Where's My Stuff?, tonight's DATELINE Hidden Camera Investigation. Here is Stone Phillips.

STONE PHILLIPS: Good evening. You're packing up your home, your memories, and moving out. Every year millions of Americans entrust all of their belongings--their furniture, electronics, their family photos and heirlooms--to total strangers with trucks. Most movers are honest, but a new breed is cropping up, ready to take your business and then take you for everything they can. And if you don't pay what they ask, you may never see your stuff again. Here's Victoria Corderi with a DATELINE Hidden Camera Investigation.

VICTORIA CORDERI reporting: (Voiceover) Tyrone and Regina Kelley started off the year ready to leave Massachusetts and gamble on living in Las Vegas.

(Road; photo of Tyrone and Regina Kelley; casino sign; roulette wheel; Las Vegas lights)

Mr. TYRONE KELLEY: (Voiceover) We were looking forward to being able to experience all these new, wonderful things.

(Desert; Las Vegas signs)

CORDERI: (Voiceover) They arrived in Las Vegas last January. Once they got their belongings, this new life they'd envisioned would begin in full--once they got their belongings.

(Interior of empty home)

Mr. KELLEY: It never occurred to me that it would be possible for somebody to steal all of our stuff and get away with it.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) They found out about an ugly little secret in the moving industry, and once you learn the industry it's too late.

(Regina and Tyrone talking to reporter; empty home)

CORDERI: Too late, because by then you're standing in your empty new home and all of your belongings--everything you own--are somewhere else. And the only way to get them is to pay what some consider a ransom. Sounds like a crime, right? Sounds like a situation

where someone--the police, the government--someone could help you. As the Kelleys and many others are finding out every day, not necessarily, when it involves the moving industry.

(Voiceover) Our DATELINE investigation, including our own moves documented by hidden cameras, reveals that though many in the industry are honest, many others are taking consumers and all of their belongings for a ride. The Kelleys found the company New York-based US Movers movers on the Internet. Their estimate, based on weight, was \$1,482 for a cross-country move. The Kelleys paid \$100 down. The movers arrived in Las Vegas a week late with a shocking announcement.

(Movers moving belongings; truck driving away; Web site on computer screen; contract and excerpts from contract; truck; Las Vegas)

Mr. KELLEY: They said they wanted \$3600 or, they said, 'We're not going to unload the truck.'

CORDERI: (Voiceover) US Movers claimed the Kelleys' belongings weighed some 2500 pounds more than the original estimate, and they provided these weight slips which they say prove it. Weigh slips show how much the truck weighs empty and with the load. But Tyrone says he didn't believe it.

(Contract; excerpts from contracts; weigh slips; excerpts from weigh slips)

Mr. KELLEY: I was thinking, 'What in the world are these people trying to pull? They--they must think I'm stupid.'

CORDERI: (Voiceover) Tyrone says he requested a reweigh of the load, but the movers refused unless he paid the full amount first. He told them he'd go get the cash, but instead went to the police.

(Tyrone and Regina talking to reporter; truck driving; cash; Tyrone and Regina talking to reporter)

CORDERI: What was their reaction when they saw you come back with a police officer?

Mr. KELLEY: Oh, they were stunned. They were stunned. But they weren't intimidated.

CORDERI: Maybe because the drivers already knew something Tyrone was about to find out from the police officer. Most of the time police consider this a contract dispute, a civil matter, not for law enforcement.

(Voiceover) The police left and the movers drove away with Tyrone's belongings.

(Tyrone and Regina)

Mr. KELLEY: I said, 'This is--I'm being robbed here. It certainly seems criminal to me.'

CORDERI: (Voiceover) So for the next three months Tyrone Kelley went on a frustrating odyssey, pleading his case to state and federal agencies, politicians, consumer groups, law enforcement--all to no avail.

(Car driving; Tyrone driving car; Tyrone talking on phone; handwritten list; courthouse; government building; consumer group logo; police station sign; Tyrone talking on phone)

Mr. KELLEY: In the past three months I've had a chance to do a lot of legal research and a whole slew of federal laws have been broken here.

CORDERI: But if that's so, then why are you still sitting here in an empty room?

Mr. KELLEY: That's the question I ask myself every day.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) It appeared the Kelleys' new start in Las Vegas had become a dead end. So we asked Tyrone to retrace the steps... (Tyrone and Regina; Tyrone and reporter)

CORDERI: The office was over here? This office?

Mr. KELLEY: Yeah. That's it.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) ...this time with DATELINE, and we would ask the questions. First stop, Ace Storage facility where US Movers was holding Tyrone's belongings. The manager wasn't there, but we spoke to him by phone.

(Tyrone and reporter; reporter talking on phone)

CORDERI: Mr. Ratliffe? Hi, Victoria Corderi, DATE--DATELINE NBC. Hi, I'm here with Tyrone and can you explain to me while--why he can't get his things back?

(Voiceover) The manager said he couldn't help because the problem was between Tyrone and the moving company.

CORDERI: I mean, the bottom line is you're saying that anything short of a court order will keep this man's stuff in storage?

Mr. KELLEY: You've experienced for yourself what I've been dealing with now.

CORDERI: Next stop, the Las Vegas Police Department. Another place where, Tyrone says, no one would listen to him.

(Car driving; Tyrone and reporter)

CORDERI: How many times have you been here?

Mr. KELLEY: Three times. Tyrone Kelley for Lieutenant Spinoza and Detective Morris.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) Suddenly, with our cameras there, Tyrone's luck seemed to change dramatically. Lieutenant Spinoza came out. (Tyrone and reporter in police station)

CORDERI: We're trying to follow up on every place this man's gone...

Lieutenant SPINOZA: Let's go...

CORDERI: ...to try to get--sure.

Lt. SPINOZA: We've got a conference room.

CORDERI: Absolutely.

(Voiceover) And he agreed to meet with us.

(Spinoza, Tyrone and reporter going into conference room)

Mr. KELLEY: It's been several months now, and I'm tired of sleeping on the floor when my stuff is only a couple of miles from my house in a storage facility.

Lt. SPINOZA: Tyrone, to tell you the truth, this isn't--it's not a simple burglary, it's not a simple robbery. I mean, there's a lot of tentacles on the thing.

CORDERI: Do you think this can get resolved?

Lt. SPINOZA: OK, we on with the--with the camera. See...

CORDERI: (Voiceover) With the camera off, Lieutenant Spinoza came up with a plan and he allowed DATELINE to follow along.

(Reporter and Tyrone walking out of police station; Tyrone and others entering storage facility offices)

Unidentified Man #1: What can I do for you?

Unidentified Police Officer: We have to serve a search warrant for...

CORDERI: (Voiceover) The police took the extraordinary measure of convincing a judge to issue a search warrant on the grounds that US Movers attempted to obtain money under false pretenses.

(Police serving search warrant; search warrant; excerpt from search warrant)

Man #1: OK, so you guys want to go out there and get in this unit.

Police Officer: That we do.

Mr. KELLEY: Yes! That's it.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) Police unloaded the unit and headed for a weigh station. Finally the argument would be settled. US Movers claimed the Kelleys' belongs weighed 4,650 pounds.

(Police opening storage facility; police unloading storage facility; truck driving; Tyrone; truck being weighed)

Unidentified Man #2: OK, the difference is 3,460 pounds.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) Vindication. It was the proof Tyrone had been waiting for.

(Tyrone and police at weigh station)

Mr. KELLEY: That's a thousand pounds less than what the movers insisted it was.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) US Movers was trying to charge the Kelleys for 1,000 pounds they didn't have. It turns out Tyrone was right.

(Police discussing weight)

Man #2: According to the search warrant, it now belongs to him.

Mr. KELLEY: Hallelujah.

CORDERI: Tyrone, who had paid only a \$100 deposit, never spoke to the moving company again. But we did. US Movers declined to be interviewed on camera, but told us Tyrone agreed to the increased estimate ahead of time, and they had the right to collect the full amount before any reweigh. US Movers also said they did not use false weigh slips regarding the Kelley's shipment. Yet they didn't provide any explanation as to why the Kelleys' belongings weighed 1,000 less than what US Movers claimed.

Mr. KELLEY: Now it feels real.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) Now the Kelleys say they will live their Las Vegas dream.

(Tyrone moving in)

Mr. KELLEY: It's going to be like Christmas. I guess we'll just open the boxes. M maybe we'll put up a little tree.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) It turns out, though, this is a happy ending in a sea of hard-luck stories.

(Empty home)

Offscreen Voice #1: (From video) Yeah, this is it. My family refers to this as the echo chamber.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) There are many others around the country still reeling from their moving day rip-offs, victims of what some call the perfect scam.

(Video of truck leaving)

Unidentified Woman #1: (From video) Oh, my God. They're taking off with my stuff.

Announcer: Next, how does that perfect scam turn into your worst nightmare?

Offscreen Voice #2: (From video) My mattress is on the back.

Offscreen Voice #3: (From video) Are you kidding?

BREAK

Offscreen Voice #4: (From video) This is how myself and my family have been having to live...

CORDERI: (Voiceover) They are all in different parts of the country, but they have a lot in common.

(Video of sparsely furnished home)

Voice #4: (From video) This is the dining room table. It's a cardboard box.

Offscreen Voice #5: (From video) This is my living room. This is where I've been sleeping, and...

CORDERI: (Voiceover) They're living in their new apartments or homes, pretending to the outside world that life is good when in reality their lives are a wreck.

(Excerpts from videos of homes)

Woman #1: You're putting up this facade of this the normal life you have, when you're actually sleeping on the floor, eating on the floor, living this nightmare.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) They are smart, educated people--a lawyer, nurse, office managers and consultants--and all of them say they got taken by moving companies they found on the Internet.

(People talking to reporter; Web site displayed on computer screen)

Voice #1: (From video) Then you walk into the kitchen area.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) When we met them, they were still in the middle of their moving mess. We asked them to videotape their experiences.

(Video of sparsely furnished home)

Voice #4: (From video) This is an air mattress. We've been having to sleep on it for a month.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) They found each other through this Web site, [movingadvocateteam.com](http://movingadvocateteam.com). It was started by a Florida man--by day a loan officer, by night a victim-turned-crusader. His own moving horror story spurred him to action.

(Web site on computer screen; James Baldarama and woman; Baldarama at computer)

CORDERI: What put that fire in your belly?

Mr. JAMES BALDARAMA: The moving company ripping off everything I own, everything my family owned, stealing my memories and with a smile on their face.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) James Baldarama's passion is one part outrage and one part amazement at what he calls the beauty of the scam.

(Baldarama working)

Mr. BALDARAMA: It's a perfect crime, and anybody in America can do it.

CORDERI: Baldarama has started a virtual grassroots movement to go after the bad Internet movers. He names names and tries to help people who are living in limbo, not knowing if they'll ever see their belongings again. He says that even though these companies have different names, their MO is the same. There's a pattern to the moving scam you can identify right from the first phone call.

Mr. BALDARAMA: They know what they're doing. It's like a script. It's perfect.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) And the script begins like this: Act one, "Have we got a deal for you."

The Web sites of the moving companies are slick, complete with consumer recommendation, federal license and insurance numbers, and the promise of very low prices.

(Graphic of Act 1; Web sites; text from Web sites)

Unidentified Woman #2: The estimate came in so low that we were just ecstatic.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) It's just the pretense, Baldarama says, of top-notch customer service.

(Web sites)

Mr. BALDARAMA: They're very nice on the phone when you first come into contact with them, they act like they're your best friend.

CORDERI: So you really had a sense of well-being.

Unidentified Woman #3: We had no clue what was about to happen.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) What happened to them and the others, says Baldarama, is act two in the script, "You're way over."

(Graphic of Act 2)

Mr. BALDARAMA: 'Once we get your stuff, then the game begins.'

CORDERI: (Voiceover) Once the movers had the boxes in the truck, estimates skyrocket, doubling, even tripling. A numbers game with the consumers on the losing end. Sometimes it happens on the day of the move.

(Boxes being taped; truck wheel; knocked-down cardboard boxes; list being checked; boxes on truck; person writing on box)

CORDERI: When they have the truck completely packed, what do they say?

Woman #2: Oh, he said, 'Well, as it all settles out, this is actually going to be about \$11,000.'

Unidentified Woman #4: From a \$1500 estimate.

Woman #2: And we're both just like...

CORDERI: (Voiceover) And other times it happens on delivery day.

(Truck driving on road)

Woman #3: They called and said, 'They're coming tomorrow. Oh, and by the way, you don't owe us \$1600, you owe \$8800. See you around 2:00.'

CORDERI: (Voiceover) And there's virtually nothing anyone can do about it, especially if people are moving on a deadline. It's act three of the script, "Time is not on your side." The movers know you're in a hurry.

(Road; side mirrors on truck; person driving truck; truck tires; graphic of Act 3)

Woman #2: And you're standing in an empty apartment. Everything's out front, it's 10:15 and--and you're supposed--like I say, you're supposed to be 3200 miles away starting your new career, opening a new office Monday morning at 8:00.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) They all tried to argue with the moving companies about the price, and that's when Baldarama says the mask comes off. Suddenly act four, "No more Mr. Nice Guy."

(Group of people talking to reporter; graphic of Act 4)

Mr. BALDARAMA: As soon as it's on the truck, it's like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. It's 'f-you' this, it's 'screw you that, don't you talk to me this way ever again. Blah, blah, blah. You pay what I want or I will guarantee you'll never see your stuff again.' Period.

Woman #4: And the guy said, 'If you guys don't start speaking nicely to me, you'll never see your stuff again.'

CORDERI: That sounds like a kidnapper.

Woman #4: Yeah. It's a ransom. You know, they hold you hostage for your things.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) Act five, they got you, and they know it, says Baldarama. After all, you have no choice but to pay if you want to get your belongings back.

(Graphic of Act 5; people talking to reporter)

Woman #1: You're entrusting everything that, you know, encompasses your life--your roots, your memories--with these people.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) This New York couple tried to fight the movers when their estimate sky rocketed from \$3,000 to \$8,000 after they had already paid 1/2 down. They began doing intense research and found a body of laws they thought would help, especially one designed to protect consumers from having their belongings held hostage. It says movers can only charge up to 10 percent more than the original estimate upon delivery. If the movers think they're owed more, they have to wait until later to try to collect the balance. So the couple told

the movers they had the money. But when the truck arrived, they said they would only pay what the law required.

(Man and woman; man and woman working on computers; pages of laws; excerpts from pages; truck; people talking to reporter)

Woman #3: He got indignant, huffed out. `Stop the move! Stop the move!' He was calling to his buddy, and they stopped the move. I said, `If you drive away with our things on your truck, we're going to have you arrested.' And guess what? They laughed, because they know that the police aren't going to come.

CORDERI: Everything you know, everything you studied--you're a lawyer--meant what in this case?

Woman #3: Nothing! It meant there here's a wonderful body of law, but you might as well line the bird cage with it because it's not good for anything else.

CORDERI: The law is rarely enforced, and even when it is, unscrupulous movers have another way to stay one step ahead with the name game--closing up shop when there are too many consumer complaints and reopening under new names, making it impossible for consumers to check them out.

(Voiceover) The North Carolina women hired Apollo Van Lines, a Florida company, and Majesty Moving and Storage--a company with numerous complaints--showed up. Apollo and Majesty are run by the same man.

(Apollo Van Lines document)

Woman #4: I really felt dumb, you know? And I really felt like I--how could I have not just typed in "Majesty Movers"? I know why. Because that's not the company I contacted.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) The New York couple hired Ameri Van Lines, the same people who used to run the Florida company's AAA Van Lines and Moving System. Moving System scammed James Baldarama.

(Moving company documents)

Woman #3: They just resurrect themselves as, you know, `two men will move you' someplace else. They just change the name, it's the same players, and they do it to someone else.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) We watched as their stories unfolded, as they tried different tactics to get their things back. This Wisconsin couple was willing to pay \$1300 more than the estimate. Then on delivery day, the company--Advance Moving Systems of Sunrise, Florida--showed up and demanded even more.

(Group of people talking to reporter; copies of checks; video of people talking to movers)

Woman #1: (From video) I've been paying you people!

CORDERI: (Voiceover) The movers would not back down. They drove away.

(Truck driving away)

Woman #1: (From video) Oh, my God. They're taking off with my stuff.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) In this case, unlike most others, the police were willing to help. It turns out the drivers were wanted in another state for criminal charges related to another move. So they arrested the drivers and brought the truck back with its contents in sorry shape. And that was not the exception, but the rule.

The North Carolina women paid Majesty moving \$7,000 for a move they were told would cost \$1500. They waited more than a month for delivery and when the truck arrived they couldn't believe what they saw.

(Video of truck driving away; police photos and documents of two men; excerpts from documents; contents of truck; women talking to reporter; moving document; excerpt from document; moving estimate; excerpt from estimate; truck arriving)

Voice #2: (From video) My mattress is on the back.

Voice #3: (From video) Are you kidding?

CORDERI: (Voiceover) The movers strapped their box spring to the outside of the truck all the way from California to North Carolina. Now it was moldy.

(Truck with mattress tied to back)

Woman #2: I would be so pissed.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) Their other belongings didn't fare any better.

(Woman carrying belongings)

Woman #2: It was all in one piece when they picked it up.

Offscreen Voice #6: (From video) So you think it was dropped. That the only way that damage would occur?

CORDERI: (Voiceover) The New York couple, after four months of persistent pestering, got the Department of Transportation to intervene. Finally Ameri Van Lines agreed to deliver their goods and honor the original estimate. Still it didn't feel like much of a victory.

(Man and woman; contract; excerpt from contract)

Woman #3: It kills me to do that, because I'm going to pay them \$1600 and that's going to put gas in their trucks so that tomorrow they can go to somebody else's house and rip them off.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) And what did they get for their trouble?  
(Woman examining belongings)  
Woman #3: (From video) Anything that had legs is basically broken.  
CORDERI: (Voiceover) And their trust is broken, too.  
(Woman examining belongings)  
CORDERI: Do you all think that you bear any responsibility in being scammed?  
Woman #1: Yes, and no. There were things I could have done differently. But I didn't ask for this.  
Woman #2: It's not that--it's not that we were just naive or--or kind of dumb or new to it. They're good.  
CORDERI: (Voiceover) Just how good are they? And how often does it really happen? We decided to try our luck with our own hidden camera moves.  
(Men moving belongings)

BREAK

Announcer: DATELINE catches movers on tape holding household goods hostage for huge payments, when Where's My Stuff?, a DATELINE Hidden Camera Investigation, continues.  
(Announcements)

Announcer: Where's My Stuff?, tonight's DATELINE Hidden Camera Investigation, continues.  
CORDERI: (Voiceover) Just how vulnerable are consumers when they move? We decided to find out. DATELINE rented two apartments, one in Raleigh, North Carolina, and other in Fairview, New Jersey. Our plan was to move from North Carolina to New Jersey, and then back...  
(People packing boxes and labeling them; woman unlocking door; second woman unlocking door; home)  
Unidentified Woman #5: We're going to take these two.  
CORDERI: (Voiceover) ...with boxes full of knickknacks, clothing and furniture we bought at thrift shops.  
(Woman picking out furniture)  
Woman #5: Love seat, the chair, the book shelf.  
CORDERI: (Voiceover) First we went the traditional route: right to the Yellow Pages and called a nationally established moving company for an estimate.  
(Woman picking out furniture; ads for moving company; woman dialing phone)  
Unidentified Man #4: (From hidden camera) Hi. Nice to meet you.

Offscreen Voice #7: (From hidden camera) Hi.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) A Mayflower sales agent came to our apartment...

(Hidden camera footage of man examining apartment)

Man #4: (From hidden camera) And you said the luggage is going to be with you?

Woman #5: (From hidden camera) Yeah.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) ...and made a detailed inventory.

(Hidden camera footage of man examining apartment)

Man #4: (From hidden camera) Are either of these hide-a-beds? Anything in here?

CORDERI: (Voiceover) Mayflower's estimate...

(Hidden camera footage of man working up estimate)

Man #4: (From hidden camera) One thousand, five hundred and seventy-two dollars and five cents.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) Then we turned to the Internet to compare prices and to select our movers. We visited several sites and filled out inventories. It's all done online and over the phone. No one from these companies comes to your home to see your belongings before giving you an estimate. Several companies responded with bids ranging from \$780 to \$1097. That's hundreds of dollars less than Mayflower's estimate. So it seemed there could be a significant savings by shopping on the Web.

For our first move from North Carolina to New Jersey, we decided to hire Move at Once!, one of the Internet movers. The company is new and it had no history of consumer complaints. Their estimate was \$914, right in the middle range of the Internet bids. When he arrived, the mover told us we'd get the final price after he loaded our belongings.

(Person typing on computer; text on computer screen; person dialing phone; boxes and belongings in home; graphics showing company logos and bids; Mayflower estimate sheet; excerpt from estimate sheet; person typing on computer; text on computer screen; woman labeling boxes; boxes; Web site on computer screen; text from Web site; estimate sheets; excerpts from sheets; man from moving company; man moving belongings)

Unidentified Man #5: (From hidden camera) If you have more item, it more money. And if it take more space in the truck, it's more money.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) According to the law, if the mover thinks we have substantially more, he's supposed to give us a new price. He didn't. But in the end, we weren't grossly overcharged. We paid \$163 more than the estimate for extra cubic feet and packing materials. (Pages of legal codes; excerpt from codes; people moving belongings; man wrapping belongings)

CORDERI: Move at Once! showed up within the three-to-five day time frame they promised. There were no additional charges, and everything arrived in good condition. So we were pleased, particularly because we saved ourselves one-third of what it would have cost with a traditional mover. Then we decided to move back to north Carolina, and that's when the real problems began. This time we selected Adam Moving, another Internet company. It has a history of the consumer complaints. We wondered if they would give us anything to complain about.

(Web site; contracts; consumer complaint forms; excerpts from forms)  
Unidentified Woman #6: (Talking on phone) Hi, I'm interested in moving.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) Adam moving estimated over the phone that our belongings weighed 2500 pounds, based on the inventory we provided. Their price: \$1,125.00 with no extra charge for fuel, tolls or mileage. It all sounded pretty straightforward...

(Woman typing at computer; estimate; excerpts from estimate)

Unidentified Man #6: (From hidden camera) Hi, guys.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) ...until moving day...

(Hidden camera footage of movers entering apartment)

Man #6: (From hidden camera) Can you show me what's going?

CORDERI: (Voiceover) ...when, before long, we weren't sure which end was up.

(Movers looking around)

Man #6: (From hidden camera) Something going from the closet?

CORDERI: (Voiceover) We were bombarded with paperwork.

(Man showing paperwork to woman)

Man #6: You're going to sign, sign, date, date. You're going to sign and signature, OK?

CORDERI: (Voiceover) Then came an onslaught of numbers, oddball mathematical calculations, and unexpected charges.

(Hidden camera footage of mover explaining to woman)

Man #6: (From hidden camera) Zero point seven cents per pound per flight.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) That equals \$250 for stairs.

(Stairs)

Man #6: (From hidden camera) Zero point zero five per pound per feet.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) That's how much for the long carry from our door to the truck?

(Hidden camera footage of man carrying belongings)

Man #6: (From hidden camera) Two hundred, 250 extra for...

Woman #6: (From hidden camera) Extra dollars?

Man #6: (From hidden camera) Yeah.

Woman #6: (From hidden camera) Wow.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) And no amount was too small to tack on.

(Hidden camera footage of mover explaining to woman)

Man #6: (From hidden camera) So usually the customer paying for the tolls.

Woman #6: (From hidden camera) Twelve dollars.

Man #6: (From hidden camera) Twelve dollars.

CORDERI: Twelve dollars for tolls, which, according to the estimate, were included. We came to learn that no matter what the estimate says, on moving day all bets are off and mathematical double-talk is the new name of the game.

Man #6: (From hidden camera) the first 2500 is going to be 0.45. If it's going to be additional extra pounds, it's going to be 0.80.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) But this double talk is serious and can cost you. He's talking about nearly doubling the charge for any extra weight, and that's where they get you.

But he was willing to make a deal. He'd offer us a flat price based on the cubic feet. In other words, how much space our belongings took up in the truck. That way, he said, we wouldn't have to worry about paying more for extra weight.

(Hidden camera footage of movers moving belongings)

Man #6: (From hidden camera) It's better doing this one, OK?

CORDERI: (Voiceover) But what they didn't know is that we were one step ahead of them and knew exactly how much our things weighed. Before the move, we loaded our belongings onto a truck, weighed it full and then empty. We wanted to see what kind of numbers game the movers might play with us. They loaded the truck and, sure enough, it was back to math class.

(Truck being weighed; full truck being weighed; empty truck being weighed; hidden camera footage of movers moving belongings)

Man #6: (From hidden camera) Three hundred, 375 cubic feet.

Wardrobe is 20. Each cubic feet is eight pound.

CORDERI: Finally after all of the mind-numbing explanations we got a price, a flat rate of \$1,746. They wanted us to pay \$600 more than the original estimate of \$1,125. Not only did that price not sound like a deal, we knew for a fact that it wasn't. Unlike other consumers, we couldn't be confused into compliance. Remember, we knew how much our belongings weighed, and their price was too high. According to their calculations, our load weighed more than 3,000 pounds. Not even close. That's a whopping 2,000 pounds more than what it really weighs. Our scale read 1,060 pounds. So we asked them how they came up with that weight, and the games began again. More cockamamie calculations.

(Hidden camera footage of movers moving belongings; full truck being weighed; hidden camera footage of movers loading truck)

Unidentified Man #7: (From hidden camera) Six book boxes. So right away you have 1.5 times six, right?

Unidentified Man #8: (From hidden camera) If it's boxes, then you can have twice as much things, and it would still be the same amount of cubic feet.

Man #7: (From hidden camera) This is the three cubes right here, or more, because if you're looking at this, this and this, you understand?

Offscreen Voice #8: (From hidden camera) Oh, right. Yeah.

Man #7: (From hidden camera) Yeah.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) We had no clue what they were talking about. But we did know it wasn't a very good explanation. The truck should have been packed tightly and stacked to the top to get an accurate measurement of cubic feet. Here, it's laid flat and packed loosely. No wonder their calculations were so far off. So we told the foreman we wanted to have our things weighed to see what he would do.

(Hidden camera footage of movers loading truck; hidden camera of man talking to woman and man)

Woman #6: (From hidden camera) I think we should weigh it.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) No surprise. He tried to dissuade us from going to a weigh station.

(Hidden camera footage of mover talking to man and woman)

Man #8: (From hidden camera) And by the way, you're going to pay for the--for the weight, OK?

CORDERI: (Voiceover) Then he called his boss.

(Hidden camera footage of man talking on phone)

Offscreen Voice #9: (From hidden camera) (From radio) You have to charge her one hour.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) So now we have to pay more than \$100 to have our things weighed. We don't think so. According to federal law, it is not supposed to cost anything. The mover kept the pressure on. (Hidden camera footage of man talking on phone)

Man #8: (From hidden camera) They way I look at it, better go with the flat rate.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) We finally agreed to the flat price to see where it would take us. The truck pulled away, and later on we reviewed our paperwork, finding the movers had checked a box that made it appear we had agreed to the price prior to loading when, in fact, we hadn't. Consumer advocates tell us that's a trick that allows movers to claim later on that clients agree to the inflated prices ahead of time.

In North Carolina our delivery was five days later than originally promised, and a different driver showed up, expecting to be paid in full. But we told him we knew the law. A consumer is only required to pay up to 10 percent more than the original estimate on delivery day. That's a law most don't learn about until after they've been ripped off. We called his boss at Adam Moving.

(Hidden camera footage of man shaking hands with man and woman; truck driving away; paperwork; excerpt from paperwork; truck driving away; hidden camera footage of movers and loaded truck; hidden camera footage of original mover and paperwork; code of regulations; excerpt from regulations; hidden camera footage of woman talking on phone)

Woman #6: (From hidden camera) (Talking on phone) The furniture won't be unloaded unless the balance is paid in full? Then you're breaking the law.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) The driver was apologetic, but he told us he had to leave with our things.

(Hidden camera footage of mover talking to woman)

Unidentified Man #9: (From hidden camera) Unfortunately, I'm an employee, and they're telling me to put your stuff in storage. I really do not want to do that, but I don't have any choice here.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) So he closed up the truck and drove away, leaving us stranded just like our victims. Then a short time later, he reappeared and saying he was just a subcontractor and he couldn't go through it.

(Hidden camera footage of movers closing truck; mover and woman)

Man #9: (From hidden camera) Because I don't want to be involved in this.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) He accepted what we were willing to pay and delivered our things. We were lucky, but many others aren't. So we tried to find out why some household moves have become such a high-stakes gamble.

(Hidden camera of movers unloading truck)

Announcer: Coming up, confronting the movers we found moving in on your belongings.

CORDERI: Can I just show you some of the evidence? We were told lie upon lie, and we have evidence here because it was DATELINE who was doing the move.

Announcer: And later, Robert Blake, talking for the first time in jail, saying he fears he won't survive.

Mr. BLAKE: (From video deposition) I don't think I'm going to make it. I think I'm going to go down.

Announcer: The tale behind the tape of Blake's jailhouse outburst.

(Announcements)

Announcer: Our DATELINE Hidden Camera Investigation, Where's My Stuff?, continues.

Unidentified Woman #7: They are very nasty, very mean. They're not business people.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) This woman worked for three months on the inside as part of a scam moving company. She says she's afraid of her old employers but wants to expose the scam.

(Silhouette of woman talking to reporter)

Woman #7: Their motto is, you know, 'Sell them your mom if you have to, tell them exactly what they want to hear. Once we get their goods, it's all up to us.'

CORDERI: (Voiceover) She says it's a free-for-all, not just with prices but with goods, too, that employees routinely help themselves to customer's belongings.

(Belongings being packaged; labeled boxes)

Woman #7: DVDs, CDs, computers, anything they can get their hands on.

CORDERI: It sounds like a candy store.

Woman #7: It is for them.

CORDERI: Why are they so unafraid?

Woman #7: Would you be afraid if you kept getting away with scams?

CORDERI: So why are some Internet movers getting away with it? The problem started in 1995 when the federal government disbanded the agency that oversaw the moving industry. The Department of Transportation's Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration handles things now, and the problem of unscrupulous movers is a low priority. Critics say it's a perfect environment for dishonest movers.

Ms. WENDY WEINBERG: The companies are certainly cognizant now that there's no oversight and that if you want to rip people off, it's relatively safe to do that within this context.

CORDERI: Wendy Weinberg is a consumer advocate who's testified before Congress about fraud in the moving industry, fraud the government is well aware of.

Ms. WEINBERG: It's outrageous. It's outrageous that it's gone unaddressed for this period of time. It's outrageous that we continue to put up with it, and it's outrageous that continually consumers are harmed to this extent.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) A 2001 General Accounting Office report and a follow-up bluntly criticize the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration as ineffective and inadequate. And two congressional hearings in 1998 and again in 2001 found the same problems.

(Reports; excerpts from reports)

CORDERI: You said pretty clearly in the 2001 hearings, 'Why are we tolerating fraud in intrastate moving.' And what was the answer you were given?

Ms. WEINBERG: There was no answer, there was no response. They haven't done anything.

CORDERI: But that's a strong charge. You're saying that we--the government--are tolerating fraud. Do you see it that way?

Ms. WEINBERG: I do see it that way. It's not a secret, but there's been no change in the law. There's been no response from Congress.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) We repeatedly asked the officials of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration to talk with us. They declined. We received this letter saying the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration is a safety agency, and "although consumer-related issues cannot be our primary focus, we are doing what is practicable, given the agency's finite resources." The agency's mission is "to reduce the number of highway crashes involving large trucks and buses." So we went to the only government person willing to go on camera, the chairman of the House Highways and Transit Subcommittee, which is supposed to oversee the moving industry. Wisconsin Representative Tom Petri headed the two hearings that so far have not resulted in any action from Congress.

(Letters from NBC News; letter from agency; excerpts from letter; the Capitol building; congressional documents; Tom Petri talking to reporter)

CORDERI: What's it going to take for a change?

Representative TOM PETRI: It's going to cha--take a majority of the House and Senate to vote for legislation to put effective remedies in place. Hopefully, we'll get something done, but we're--we're working on it, is the best I can say.

CORDERI: Well, you know, a lot of people listening to that who've been ripped off would say that's not good enough.

Rep. PETRI: It's not good enough, but it's better than nothing.

CORDERI: Petri says this issue is not high on anyone's agenda in Congress. Right now federal law does not enable the government to force moving companies to return consumer's money or goods, nor does it allow the states to use their own laws to crack down on bad movers. The solution supported by many is to pass legislation allowing states to do just that, but the moving industry lobby is against it, arguing legitimate movers would be deluged with paperwork and crippled if they had to comply with each state's diverse consumer protection laws.

(Voiceover) So right now, says Congressman Petri, consumers need to protect themselves with this pamphlet from the Federal Motor Carrier's Web site, "Your Rights and Responsibilities When You Move." Movers are required by law to provide it but many don't. It's supposed to be a blueprint for a good move, but just try to find it.

(Web site; excerpts from Web site)

CORDERI: First of all you would have to know to go to the Federal Motor Carrier's Web site, and most of America wouldn't even know where a Federal Motor Carrier is.

Rep. PETRI: Right.

CORDERI: Then you would have to download this big, thick, small-print, very difficult to read, document...

Rep. PETRI: Right.

CORDERI: ...which may leave you more baffled than when you started.

Rep. PETRI: Probably will.

CORDERI: Right. So, this is the answer? Like, what good it is this?

Rep. PETRI: This is--this is what the federal government has done to date. That's why we're talking about trying to give authority to the states.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) There's a phone number on the pamphlet to call if you have any questions. It doesn't work.

(Text from pamphlet)

Electronic Voice: The number you have reached is not in service.

CORDERI: "The number you have reached is not in service." What the heck does that say?

Rep. PETRI: That' says that you better not rely just on the government.

CORDERI: On whom can you rely? What are you supposed to do?

Rep. PETRI: I would recommend checking people out.

CORDERI: Well, we talked to consumers who got ripped off even though they did do research.

Rep. PETRI: Right.

CORDERI: And if they can't turn to the government, and they've done their work, what are they supposed to do

Rep. PETRI: Right.

CORDERI: That's not a rhetorical question. What are they supposed to do?

Rep. PETRI: They're supposed it get a better--better recourse in place, and that's what we're working on.

CORDERI: In the meantime, what do the movers say? We researched the companies hired by the victims we met and found a trail of complaints and lawsuits alleging fraud, breach of contract, loss, damage, physical and emotional distress. All the movers declined on camera interviews. One company, Majesty Moving, sent us a letter saying they handle every complaint seriously and strive to conclude complaint in a professional and efficient manner. But we wanted a full explanation from all of the movers. So we decided to track them down. Most are based in New York and Florida, and the majority of them had similar responses.

(Letters and legal documents; excerpts from documents; reporter approaching business; reporter trying to open locked door; doors closing)

CORDERI: ...and in particular...

(Door closes)

CORDERI: Can you just open the door, please?

Can you stop and talk to us for a second?

Unidentified Man #10: Out, out, out, out!

CORDERI: Is that a no?

I'm Victoria Corderi with DATELINE NBC.

(Voiceover) The only one willing to speak to us on camera was this man, Mayer Hogby, from Adam Moving, the company DATELINE contracted with as part of our undercover move. We told him we had problems.

(Reporter talking to Mayer Hogby; hidden camera footage of truck being loaded; reporter talking to Hogby)

CORDERI: We were told lie upon lie, and we have evidence here, because it was DATELINE who was doing the move.

(Voiceover) Remember Adam Moving overcharged us and altered the paperwork to make it look as if we agreed to their price ahead of time. When we showed him the undercover videotape, he had little to say.

(Paperwork from moving company; reporter showing video to Hogby)

CORDERI: OK, you see that? The stuff was on the truck. We had not--then--then, OK, then he starts talking about this price. And that's against the law. OK, let me show you.

Everything...

Mr. MAYER HOGBY: I still don't see anything.

CORDERI: OK--no, no. They...

Mr. HOGBY: I don't see anything.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) He insisted our tape proved nothing. He would only admit the movers were wrong when they told us we would have to pay to have our belongings weighed.

(Reporter talking to Hogby)

CORDERI: Ninety-eight dollars an hour for labor to go to the weigh station.

Mr. HOGBY: That--to go to the weigh--no. They're not supposed to charge you.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) We told him we had our belongings weighed beforehand, and no matter how he tried to justify the price with mathematical double-talk, just as his employee did, the bottom line is...

(Hidden camera footage of movers loading truck)

CORDERI: ...you were 2,000 pounds off.

Mr. HOGBY: First of all, I'm not off by anything, because it's cubic feet...

CORDERI: We had our things weighed.

Mr. HOGBY: It's cubic feet times seven. That's what you don't get.

CORDERI: (Voiceover) Eventually he walked away, leaving many questions unanswered. He later called and said he fired the mover who had overcharged us. He sent a letter of apology and a \$250 check, and said his company makes every effort to resolve consumer complaints. But most never receive an offer. Certainly none of these people did. Right now when it comes to moving, consumers might want to heed the words of those who have learned the hard way.

(Hogby entering home; letter from mover; copies of checks; excerpts from letter; group of people talking to reporter)

CORDERI: How would you describe this entire episode?

Woman #4: Nightmare.

Woman #3: Hell. Just horrible. Anybody who's moving, oh, my gosh, research like crazy, ask people, have them come to your home and give you a legitimate estimate, because they've seen your things and they know where you're going, and--and don't just go for the bottom line.

JANE PAULEY: In response to consumer complaints, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration has now fined three of the companies we investigated: Advanced Moving Systems, Ameri, and Majesty. All three companies are challenging the fines.

For a smooth move, the American Moving and Storage Association suggests you select a company that has a good rating with the Better Business Bureau. If you'd like to let your congressional representative know your feelings about the regulations that govern movers, or if you'd like further tips on moving, logon to our Web site. The address is [dateline.msnbc.com](http://dateline.msnbc.com).